

Nation Builders? The Captive Labour Force of Non-English-Speaking Immigrant Women

by Roxana Ng and Tania Das Gupta

Les femmes immigrantes non anglophones constituent une main-d'oeuvre prisonnière. Les auteures veulent montrer comment le travail invisible de ces femmes sert de fondation à l'économie canadienne.



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The women's movement has brought to light the important contributions of — mainly upper and middle class — women in Canadian history and the struggles they waged to improve the lot for other women. Today, women continue to fight many battles to better the conditions for half of the society. However, most of the demands and struggles we engage in have barely touched the lives of many working class women — especially non-English-speaking immigrant women. Many of us are unaware of the contributions they make to Canada and the disservice this country has done them. The crucial role these women play in the Canadian economy has certainly gone unrecognized for a long time.

This article is written with the intention of bringing into focus the invisible work that non-English-speaking immigrant women have done and continue to do in silence. Our research suggests that immigrant women constitute what we call a 'captive labour force' in Canada. By this we mean that the opportunities available to immigrant women, both as housewives and as wage earners, are severely limited owing to their location in society. This article is largely descriptive. Its aim is to provide a context within which to understand this 'captive labour force' and its relation to the Canadian economy.

The immigration program of Canada has been designed with the expressed purpose of directing demographic growth on the one hand and meeting labour market demands on the other. Once immigrants are in Canada, they enter the labour market and increase competition for jobs, thereby providing industries and businesses with a relatively cheap labour pool. At the other end of the spectrum, immigrants are frequently forced to leave their countries because of political and economic reasons.

The Immigration Act of 1976, implemented in 1978, serves to divide Canadian residents into two categories (citizens and landed immigrants) by subjecting immigrants to special rules and regulations. For instance, they can be deported if they are *suspected* of being subversive. Since 'subversion' in the act is not spelled out, many immigrants are afraid to engage in activities, including joining a union, which may be labelled subversive. Indeed, a recent study by S. Arnopoulos reveals that employers *do* use the provisions in the act to intimidate immigrant workers.

Since the mid-70s, family reunification and immigration on humanitarian grounds (i.e. refugees) are stressed to allow more sponsored immigrants to enter Canada under the 'family

class' classification. Most immigrant women come to Canada under this category via the sponsorship of their husbands or relatives and are not expected to enter the labour force. However, many do find their way into the labour market at one time or another, taking jobs in such areas as domestic service, which are not recorded in employment statistics.

Moreover, the sponsorship system makes immigrant women totally dependent on their sponsors, who are legally responsible for them financially. Their legal status, as sponsored immigrants, automatically cuts them off from any social services and benefits available to other Canadians. For instance, an immigrant woman cannot obtain welfare unless she can prove a break with her sponsor. This may involve proving that she and her husband are legally separated; in the case of a relative, that the sponsor is unwilling or can no longer support her and her children. In any event, the procedure of legally terminating this relationship is degrading and painful for both the immigrant woman and her family. The point to note here is that this system reinforces the dependency of the woman on her husband and her sponsor.

When immigrant families come to Canada, they become more integrated into a money economy. Whereas in the home country, women may produce many of the products used for family consumption, in Canada these products have to be purchased with money. Non-English-speaking immigrants usually occupy positions at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy earning only subsistence wages. The family's increased expenditures cannot be met and the women are forced to seek wage-work outside the home to subsidize family incomes. However, even when women work outside the home, they are still primarily responsible for organizing the work inside the home and managing the everyday contingencies of living in a highly industrialized urban setting with its concomitant social problems. Their paid work must always be organized in relation to their family responsibilities. This severely limits the options available to them. They are restricted to certain types of jobs which require little English and which can be fit into a schedule of housework and child care.

Non-English-speaking immigrant women are commonly recruited into three kinds of services and industries. First, they are recruited into private service as office cleaners or domestic workers through a network of informal contacts. This kind of employment suits them because they do not have to use English and it offers some flexibility in working hours essential to women with family responsibilities. Second, they are employed in manufacturing and retail industries, such as light manufacturing in textile, garment and plastic factories. Third, they are employed in service industries including restaurants, hotels and other food industries. Immigrant women occupy the lowest positions in these types of work. In the garment industry, for

example, they are mainly sewing machine operators with practically no opportunity for upward mobility. In the service sector, they are dishwashers, kitchen help, chambermaids and janitors.

The jobs open to immigrant women have been described as 'unskilled and dead-end'. But we found that in order to procure these jobs, immigrant women must have a variety of general, interchangeable skills which they have developed from housekeeping and childrearing. They are available on short-term, temporary, or even on an emergency basis. Working hours are also extremely irregular, ranging from a temporary, on-call basis in domestic and kitchen work to shift work in factories and hotels. Very few of them, with the exception of those in the garment and textile industries, are protected by labour standard legislation and union contracts. Fringe benefits, such as medical and pension plans, are not provided.

The story of Maria, a 59-year-old semi-retired worker, epitomizes the experience of many non-English-speaking immigrant women in the captive labour force.

Maria came to Canada in 1955 with her husband and five children. They were tenant farmers in southern Italy and went bankrupt. They were sponsored to Canada by Maria's brother. Maria held a variety of jobs since she came to Canada. She got a job in a restaurant washing dishes two days after the family arrived in Toronto. For 10 years, Maria's daily routine went something like this: She started her day cleaning people's houses at 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. At four, she went to work at the restaurant until one o'clock the next day. From her domestic service, Maria acquired cast-off clothing for her children; from the restaurant she brought home left-over food to feed her family. On the weekend she did housework with the help of her eldest daughter, who was responsible for looking after the younger children, plus the shopping and banking.

Maria did stay home for a couple of years after the birth of her sixth child. Then she went back to work because the family needed the money. At one time, she got a job cleaning in a bank. She would go to work between four and eight in the morning, before people came to work. She went home just in time for her eldest daughter to leave for school. She stayed home during the day looking after the baby, and went around cleaning houses and offices again at night.

Maria is proud that she now has a nice house and that her children all had a good education. At the time of the interview, she was still working as a cleaner in a textile factory. "Now," said Maria contentedly, "I go to work because I enjoy it. When I am tired, I go home."

Maria's experience reveals that the 'benefits' which non-English-speaking immigrant women receive from their jobs are dependent upon good

personal relationships with the employer or supervisor. As individual workers, immigrant women have no rights. The wages they earn are inadequate to maintain themselves and their families. As workers, they are completely unprotected and are vulnerable to exploitation.

At first glance, educational programs offering special skills and training appear to be a way in which immigrant women can acquire additional credentials and move out of the captive labour force. However, our study reveals that, in practice, these programs are inaccessible to most non-English-speaking immigrant women.

Educational programs offered by Employment and Immigration can be divided into two types: job training and skill upgrading programs, and English language training (ESL). Immigrants who are primary earners can take these programs free of charge. While taking the courses, they can obtain an allowance for their families. Since most immigrant women are sponsored and are not considered primary earners, they are not eligible for these programs. If they wish to take ESL courses, then they or their sponsor have to pay. Frequently, the high costs of these programs render them inaccessible to immigrant women. In terms of job training programs, a minimum of Grade 8 English, or the equivalent, is required. Most immigrant women are automatically excluded by this admission criterion. Educational programs are usually more of a hindrance than a help to women in the captive labour force.

Finally, the role played by labour unions historically also contributes to the maintenance of the captive labour force. The goals of immigration policies and organized labour are antagonistic to each other. Immigration policies are designed to meet the demands of industries by allowing workers to enter the country, thereby helping to depress wages by increasing the competition for jobs. To protect themselves from excessive exploitation, Canadian workers band together to form labour unions, thereby replacing competition with co-operation. With sufficient numerical strength, organized labour can demand higher wages and better working conditions. In the past, male workers did this by excluding or selectively organizing women, ethnic minorities and children, thus contributing to the formation of a segregated labour force. As a result of this tradition in our union history, many

of the jobs in the lower echelons of the labour market remain unorganized to this day. Most non-English-speaking immigrant women, with the exception of about 40 per cent of those in the garment and textile industry, are locked into the unorganized job ghetto. Employers also make working conditions extremely difficult for organizing.

All in all, poor wages and working conditions mean that immigrant women are forced to depend on their husband economically. The home which is the male immigrant worker's refuge, becomes a trap for immigrant women.

How do immigrant women contribute to the Canadian economy? Canada's economy is based on a free enterprise system where businesses compete for a share in the consumer market and workers compete for jobs in exchange for a wage in the labour market. In order for this system to function effectively, it is crucial that consumers increase their level of consumption over time. In this regard, immigrant housewives are important because they increase demands for consumer goods. In addition, they supply Canada with a cheap, ready, labour pool which can be manipulated according to the demands of the economy. Because they are vulnerable, immigrant women are often seen as dispensable. They are considered 'secondary' earners when in fact their earnings are necessary in sustaining the family and the family's buying power. Most importantly, the woman's work in the home is essential in maintaining and freeing the male immigrant worker, so that he is able to work and compete in the labour market to meet the demands for production of goods and services. This is an area of women's work which, until the women's movement, has largely gone unnoticed and unaccounted for.

We find that there is a paradox in the 'free enterprise' system. As our study shows, immigrant women in the captive labour force have very little choice in what they do inside and outside the home. There are many processes that keep immigrant women in captivity both in the labour force and in the family. A system based on freedom and equality is, in fact, based on the non-freedom of *some* members of society. Our research indicates that non-English-speaking immigrant women are also nation builders. Their work is undervalued and underpaid. The invisible work performed by them provides the underpinning of a social structure which appears to be free and equal — BUT ISN'T. ©

This is an edited version of a paper entitled, 'The Captive Labour Force of Non-English-Speaking Immigrant Women.' Our initial work was part of a larger project on working class women and the educational system conducted by the Wollstonecraft Research Group at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the spring of 1980. The Wollstonecraft Research Group is a group concerned to conduct and advance research in education in relation to women.

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